



Mental Health Committee

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Mental Health Training for Teachers in Schools

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Position

It is the position of Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of Iowa's youth, to promote the change of Senate File 2113 to bi-yearly mandatory training for all educational personnel on mental health in students. There would be a required 90-minute training provided by the Iowa Area Education Agencies, or other outside agencies, in the beginning, and middle of each school year.

Current Situation

Mental health is a cumbersome issue for many youths, as mental health impacts a youth's ability to perform well academically, as well as impacts their relationship with peers and family members. This bill is needed in the Iowa legislature because many mental health illnesses go unnoticed for 8-10 years according to the National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI). Youth experience many traumatic things, such as abuse, former homelessness, death, etc. This bill is needed to support teachers receiving education to develop the background knowledge necessary to recognize the onset of mental health symptoms. There is a current pandemic, with suicide being in the top 9 leading causes of death in Iowa according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to Russ, Mental health continues to be a concern for many teachers, with 93% worrying about the mental health needs of students. According to Child Trends, 85% of teachers say they need more mental health training. Helping further teachers' education on mental health is important as the elevation of stress and anxiety, which can evolve into mental health issues, has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic for many students (NPR.org). That's why during the COVID-19 pandemic three professional organizations declared the state of children's mental health as a national emergency according to NPR.

Mental health directly relates to a student's performance in relationship with school. High school teachers spend around 30 hours weekly with students for approximately 25 weeks, meaning they have a large impact on a youth's mental health. It is imperative that a student feels comfortable and secure with their teachers and administrators. Positive relationships between a teacher and a student provide a level of comfort allowing a student to take academic risks that will advance academic achievements. Ideally, school is a safe place for students; we want youth of all ages to feel comfortable talking to their teachers about anything, and we want teachers to be confident in their ability to help students in need. However, this is not happening, according to the National Alliance on Mental Health "58.1% of Iowans aged 12-17 who have depression did not receive any care in the last year." (NAMI).

Whether it be a crisis situation like an anxiety attack or something more subtle, teachers need to be more prepared for when these problems arise. According to [the National Center for Education Statistics](#), 76% of public schools in the country reported increased concerns about students showing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma in the 2021-22 academic year. Not to mention, in 2018, the Iowa Youth Survey documented that about one-fourth of the student population of eleventh graders had entertained the thoughts of suicide (Iowa Youth Survey, 2018). The issue surrounding students' mental health has always existed, but the urgency of the situation has skyrocketed after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, over the course of 2022, many teachers have left or retired from school districts, and Iowa is no exception. According to KCCI, 55% of teachers have resigned or retired. As teachers have resigned, class sizes have gotten bigger and this is not beneficial for the teachers or students as 10% of teachers who have left the profession or moved to another school said, class sizes were their motive, according to bethel university. Teachers have not just retired from the class size but due to the amount of stress teaching has put on them, according to teach career coach, 23% of teachers reported their work as always being stressful. Meanwhile, a whopping 38% of teachers cited their work as being often stressful. Many teachers have also cited COVID-19, remote learning, student behavior, and politics as reasons for their growing frustrations. The increase in gun violence, especially in schools, has not helped teachers feel welcomed in a post-pandemic world. From 2020-2022 there have been a total of 11 school shootings in Iowa using data from the Center of Homeland and Defense Security (CHDS). With all these factors suddenly being put on teachers' shoulders, it becomes difficult for teachers to know how to take care of themselves. Teachers first need to be able to help themselves first before they can help a child in need. The first step that needs to be taken should be helping teachers feel more comfortable in their work environments.

This bill is desperately needed for teachers to have the training, skills, and resources to identify and help any negative mental health symptoms in their students and in themselves. Teachers often play a vital role in how students navigate these possible new challenges. As suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for youth aged 15-19 (World Health Organization, 2021) and the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15-44 (Vital Statistics of Iowa Annual Report, 2019) in the State of Iowa, it is important that teachers are trained to notice any warning signs to keep our children safe. Nevertheless, teachers have very little to no support at all when it pertains to both their mental health and the mental health of their students.

Rationale

Mental health is a vital issue that can be addressed by proper training, specifically social emotional, and educator wellness training. It's a problem that continues to affect the well-being of many individuals; youth and adults alike. Mental Illness affects youth in ways that hinder and poses danger to their future and the future of our nation. Many teens who experience mental illness turn to drugs, alcohol, and suicide to solve an issue that could be addressed with help from teachers. Research shows that 14 percent of youth who suffer from mental illness mostly received Ds and Fs, which is relatively high compared to only 7 percent for all children with disabilities. Meeting with a properly trained counselor or teacher may help significantly in reducing the absence and tardiness of students that experience mental health issues. Research by Youth.Gov demonstrates that a talk with a school staff can reduce a student's tardiness by 25% and absence by 50%. That is a vast improvement that can reach the future leaders of our community. It will be a great resource that enables teachers in our community to better understand and build a transparent relationship with their students, allowing their students to be comfortable enough with them to seek help when needed. This also helps teachers to be on the lookout for signs of mental illness to be better prepared to help the student before it escalates. By addressing this issue now, not only would more youth be reached, but it would also help students and staff build a stronger and more transparent relationship. When there is transparency, there is transformation.

There is also an association between teachers' mental health and student well-being. Both may be partially explained by teachers being stressed and poor teacher-student relationships.

Teachers have the stress of dealing with in-school duties such as lesson planning and dealing with students/other school staff/ parents, as well as having to deal with things in their personal life. As well as having to deal with current issues such as COVID-19. Teachers who are taught to properly take care of their mental health will be able to have the tools to cope with stressors in the workplace.

Teachers who understand the severity of mental health concerns will also provide a secure place for the students as well as potentially provide individual help.

Recommended Action

If officially supported by Iowa Legislature, any and all new information would be taught through additional training, while future educators are in college, as well as updated training for those who have already graduated. Each group would also attend annual mandatory meetings with the emerging information found on mental health for educators and the best approaches to helping students. Training would be given by researchers, doctors, or educators who are subject matter expertizes who specialize in understanding the influence mental illnesses have on adolescents and educators. These classes would also teach healthy programs. Healthy programs would "promote the healthy social and emotional development of all children and youth... identify how to intervene early and appropriately when there are problems" (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019).

Subsequently, high school teachers must be taught how to respond if they believe a student is at risk. There is not one right way to handle each situation as every person, relationship, and illness is different. However, actions could be taken by merely starting a conversation between the student and the teacher, where the adult checks in on the student on a regular basis. The check-in rate could vary from daily, weekly, monthly, or as needed, depending on the individual situation. Conversations could be held in school; however, despite the location, it is advisable to ensure the conversations are private.

Teachers must be taught about their own mental health and how it affects the way they treat students as well. These pieces of training will be mandatory, held at the beginning and middle of each school year. Educator wellness would be taught at the beginning of the year, while the social-emotional training will be held in the middle of the school year and will be comprehensive education. It will be up to the board of education to determine who the appropriate professional mental health associates will be and to assign them to their districts. These pieces of training will be funded by the surplus once approved.

Regards,

Mental Health Committee
Iowa Youth Congress

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